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New ground rules needed on CIA's links to colleges

GIVEN THE history of the Central Intelligence Agency, the alarm bells set off by disclosures that the CIA is again developing links with university campuses were timely and appropriate.

No one seriously suggests that intelligence operatives should be forbidden to consult scholars on matters of mutual interest. Indeed, such contacts can, if kept within proper limits, serve both national security and higher learning.

As one intelligence official points out, academic experts tend to challenge the agency's often rigid thinking and offer a different and often more accurate perspective on events. The CIA's inability to understand the revolutionary pressures building in Iran during the 1970s is cited as an example of an intelligence failure that might have been averted if the agency had listened to informed outsiders.

Agency supports research

Scholars, for their part, obviously benefit from the agency's interest in supporting research on distant places and obscure subjects.

Still, there are reasons for both sides to be wary. What's disappointing is that the agency and some academics seem to forget past abuses and the safeguards meant to prevent them from recurring.

It was less than 20 years ago, after all, that the CIA's secret funding and manipulation of the National Student Association became the first in an array of scandals that brought to light a pattern of questionable, often illegal behavior. Until President Johnson outlawed the practice, the agency also subsidized religious, labor and other private groups.

Later investigations showed that the CIA used professors, as well as journalists and clergymen, to prepare propaganda or gather intelligence.

The credibility of institutions and individuals whose purpose is to seek truth in an atmosphere of open inquiry can be severely compromised by an agency that specializes in stealth and deception. That's the reason for the

furore, in Congress and on campuses, over the CIA's efforts to forge new ties with university faculties.

What's needed, however, is not a strict separation of academia and the intelligence community, but rather a mutual acceptance of the ground rules that must govern what under the best of circumstances is a tricky relationship. No one benefits when a professor is discredited because he is persuaded

to take CIA money on the sly.

Both spies and professors ought to understand by now that scholarly conferences are immediately suspect and should not masquerade as unbiased when the CIA secretly pays the bills. The agency was asking for, and deserved, trouble when it clandestinely subsidized a forum at Harvard and quietly supported research for a book written by the head of the university's Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

CIA-backed research is subject to suppression and censorship, which are abhorrent to academic communities. Harvard and other colleges do not let faculty members agree to submit manuscripts to the agency for review.

Inevitable conflicts can be kept to a minimum, however, if the agency recognizes that times have changed and it must now play by the rules. A greater willingness by the CIA to acknowledge publicly its participation in campus events and support for unclassified research would reduce suspicion without putting secrets at risk.

Otherwise, the agency will find the doors of academia shut tight once again. Naturally, the country wants its spies to be well-informed, but it should continue to place a higher value on the independence of its scholars.